



Barriers to employers in developing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender-friendly workplaces

Introduction

One of the aims of the Government's *Equality Strategy - Building a Fairer Britain* is to work with business to develop a fairer and more flexible labour market that draws on the talents of all and builds a strong economy. Equality of opportunity is vital to building a strong, modern economy which benefits from the talents of all of its members. An organisation which is open and welcoming to all everyone will attract the best talent. *Barriers to employers in developing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender-friendly workplaces* identifying motivators and barriers to employer action and the steps employers can take to make their workplaces more lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGB&T) friendly in order to fully use the potential of LGB&T employees.

Key findings

- Employers should treat issues of sexual orientation and gender identity separately.
- Motivators to make workplaces more LGB-friendly includes perceived business benefits, legislation and a general concern for equality and diversity.
- Barriers to action include inertia, nervousness about discussing and tackling this issue, lack of knowledge, belief that action is unnecessary and prioritising other equality strands.
- There is a lack of evidence on the business benefits of making workplaces more LGB&T friendly.
- Employer action on transgender equality is mainly stimulated by and focused on supporting staff through transitioning, rather than making workplaces transgender-friendly generally.
- To improve transgender-friendliness at work requires tackling hostility and ignorance in society, as well as action in the workplace.

Background

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people experience discrimination and harassment in the workplace. To tackle this, employers need to make their workplace more 'LGB&T friendly'. The concentration on 'friendliness' is to highlight the importance of going beyond anti-discrimination and harassment policies to create a culture that enables people to be open about their sexual orientation and gender identity.



Research findings

Motivators and barriers to employers creating LGB-friendly workplaces

Employers' reasons for initiating LGB equality policies and practices included:

- to improve equality and diversity across all equality strands generally;
- to improve provision to lesbian and gay customers and service users;
- to ensure legal and statutory responsibilities were met;
- to secure business benefits; and
- to be seen as a champion in the area of equality, including sexual orientation.

The main barriers to taking action for LGB equality were:

- employers' nervousness about the issue;
- inertia;
- belief that no action was necessary as the organisation was already fair;
- lack of knowledge about what to do;
- anticipated objections from employees; and
- prioritising other equality strands, since these were seen as more cost-effective.

Barriers could be overcome by having a clear organisational commitment, support at senior level, having an active LGB network and making a clear business case to employees for action on sexual orientation equality. Barriers were hardest to overcome in peripheral sites and male-dominated environments.

Motivators and barriers to employers creating transgender-friendly workplaces

The main motivator to employers to take action on transgender equality was having an employee transitioning. However, this could result in action to assist the individual, rather than making the workplace more transgender-friendly generally.

The main barriers to taking action on transgender equality were a lack of recognition of the issue in general and as a workplace issue, in particular. Other barriers were:

- a lack of perceived need to tackle this issue;
- lack of knowledge of gender identity issues, legal requirements and appropriate actions; and
- hostility and fear towards transgender people from management and staff.

Only employers with a high commitment to equality and diversity seemed to take action, other than when an employee was transitioning. Employers were prompted by:

- reviews, benchmarking or development of equality and diversity policies covering other equality strands, especially LGB;
- pressure from interested individuals, including LGB networks;
- legislation on gender reassignment;
- perceived business benefits; and
- recognition of the trans community as customers, service users and facilitators of the employers' business.

Business benefits of LGB & T-friendly workplaces

There is a lack of evidence on the business benefits and costs of developing LGB&T-friendly workplaces.



For LGB, perceived benefits are:

- human resourcing: easier recruitment; improved morale, commitment, motivation, reduced stress, reduced absence/sickness, better employee relations, higher retention and, ultimately, increased efficiency, productivity and customer service;
- tapping in to the 'pink pound'; improved service provision to the LGB community; meeting customers' procurement equality requirements; and
- avoidance of tribunal costs and damage to reputation.

For transgender equality, the main benefits relate to the morale (and hence productivity) of existing trans employees and their colleagues. Other benefits are avoidance of litigation costs and transgender expertise for certain products or services.

Employers saw the costs of developing LGB&T-friendly workplaces as low and believed business benefits to outweigh costs. Nevertheless, resource constraints sometimes resulted in action on LGB&T equality taking second place to other equality strands.

Support for employers

The picture of support for employers wishing to improve their LGB& T-friendliness is mixed. Documentation, consultancy and employer LGB&T networks all exist, but are limited, particularly for trans people. Employees in larger companies appear to be better served.

Support seems to be provided mainly by non-commercial organisations, dominated by Stonewall for LGB and a small number of small organisations for trans. Employers consider that Government organisations seem to provide little of the detailed human resource information or consultancy support.

This pattern may lead to difficulties accessing consultancy support for some employers, particularly, for LGB, for those who prefer a different approach to Stonewall's and for smaller employers.

Conclusions

The main conclusions of the study were as follows.

In respect of LGB:

- LGB and trans are different issues. Combining the two seems to result in gender identity being overlooked.

To drive forward action on LGB equality:

- it is important to develop organisational commitment at a senior level;
- LGB networks can be useful; and
- continuous restatement of policies and review of practices is necessary.

In respect of transgender:

- Transgender as a workplace issue is overlooked, seen as irrelevant (unless an employee is transitioning) and little understood;
- There is substantial ignorance about transgender and hostility towards transgender people;
- Despite the availability of good employer support from transgender organisations, employers can be at a loss on how to proceed.

Recommendations

The recommendations include:

- treating LGB and transgender issues separately;
- the promotion of employer networks on transgender and on sexual orientation;
- increased good practice guidance on transgender and on sexual orientation equality;



- a campaign to promote LGB employer actions, presenting business arguments and sources of information and assistance;
- the provision of low cost LGB advice and consultancy for smaller employers; and
- publicity about the employment effects of LGB employees not being able to be themselves at work.
- workplaces should develop proactive policies and practices, so that those with gender identity issues feel more confident about raising the issue.
- for transgender people, publicity to reduce ignorance and create greater acceptance and action to reduce hostile media coverage.

There is a need for further employer support for developing LGB&T-friendliness:

- detailed assistance is required; employers seem to appreciate case studies illustrating policies and practices;
- provision of support by the state and the third sector may be considered useful due to perceived lower cost; and

Government might encourage employer action on LGB equality through:

- stronger enforcement of legislation,

helping employers to recognise the business benefits of action and assisting the establishment of networks;

- creating parity across the equality strands, including through ensuring the public sector implements the public sector equality duty equally across the equality strands; and
- raising awareness of potential benefits, so that employers can consider what is relevant for their own business; case study examples might be helpful;
- better signposting of other information and assistance sources for transgender and for sexual orientation matters on Government websites.

About the project

The study was based on: qualitative interviews with 27 employers at differing stages of developing LGB&T policies and practices; interviews with seven LGB&T and stakeholder organisations; a brief literature review of business benefits of LGB&T policies and practices research; and a web search to identify specialist providers of employer support for developing LGB&T policies and practices. The fieldwork took place in Spring 2010.

Further information

The full report, by **Hilary Metcalf and Heather Rolfe, National Institute of Economic and Social Research** is published by the Government Equalities Office (GEO).

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